



Reply to Critics

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For A Symposium on *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*
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Reply to Critics

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The problem with a symposium like this is that it comes too late. I wish I had all of these insightful comments before *The Enlightenment of Sympathy* went to press, when I could still make changes. These would not have been major, substantive changes, but there is a lot that I would have liked to clarify. I cannot address all the comments in the space allotted, but I do appreciate the opportunity provide what will necessarily remain an incomplete response.

The most important place where clarification is needed is in the definition of the central concept of the book: moral sentimentalism. Moral sentimentalism, and the moral rationalism to which it is opposed, are theses about what might be called normative moral psychology. They are theses about how we ought to carry out our internal moral deliberations, our moral reflection, as I call it.

Normative moral psychology is a very complex field of inquiry. Any author who addresses the subject adequately will address it with a richness that cannot be reduced to a mere categorization on one side or the other of a simple dichotomy. The rationalist and the sentimentalist are merely Weberian ideal types. As with all ideal-typical schemes, the goal here cannot be to capture all the subtleties of the range of phenomena being categorized. Rather, the idea is to give shape to an otherwise shapeless world by drawing rough boundaries around sets of phenomena which have more in common with each other than they do with those classified under a different ideal type.

With that in mind, here is my ideal-typical scheme: Rationalists maintain that proper moral reflection is moral reasoning—and hence that only one mental faculty, reason, has any significant role to play. Sentimentalists maintain that many mental faculties have a role to play—reason, yes, but also imagination and emotion and, last but far from least, the imaginative sharing of emotions

known as sympathy. Professor Zuckert is right that the degree of psychological holism may vary among sentimentalists. Herder constantly emphasizes that the mind is an indivisible, organic unity, while Hume bases his theory around distinctions between various mental faculties (albeit faculties that he himself acknowledges are in fact “uncompounded and inseparable” [Hume 2000, 3.2.2.14: 317]). But whatever their degree of psychological holism more generally, what unites the sentimentalists is their conviction that moral reflection is far more psychologically holistic than a rationalist would ever acknowledge.

Sentimentalism in my sense is not the theory that sympathy alone is the proper foundation of morality—that proper moral reflection is simply a matter of sympathizing properly. I realize that I might not have made this clear, but I meant the title of my book to have a double meaning. *The Enlightenment of Sympathy* is not a book about people in the Enlightenment era who loved sympathy uncritically. It is a book about people who emphasized how sympathy needs to be enlightened through a process of reflection in order to fulfil its central moral role properly.

Of course, in order to be enlightened in this way, sympathy must be enlightenable. It must be the kind of faculty susceptible to the right kind of reflective correction. Rousseau’s contention that the faculty which he calls *pitié* is not excludes him from being the kind of enlightened, reflective sentimentalist that I am discussing. In the *Second Discourse*, natural *pitié* is simply destroyed by reflection. But even in *Emile*, where this is less obviously the case, *pitié* is not the kind of faculty capable of playing the role which reflective sentimentalists such as Hume, Smith and Herder ask it to play.

I wish I had addressed this more in the book, but if we assume that Rousseauvian *pitié* and Humean or Smithian sympathy are meant as competing descriptions of a single psychological phenomenon, then there are clearly significant disagreements between Rousseau and his Scottish contemporaries on the matter. But here is where empirical moral psychology can come to the aid of normative moral psychology. Smith, I think, is empirically correct about how we can imaginatively share the emotions of others, while Rousseau is empirically wrong.

Consider the two maxims from *Emile* that Professor Radasanu mentioned. First, the maxim that we do not put ourselves in the place of people who are happier than we are, that we cannot sympathize with joy greater than our own. I can attest from countless personal experiences of shared joy that this is false. Why else would we be made happy when a fairy tale ends happily ever after? Second, the maxim that we feel for only those others suffering from ills from which we do not feel ourselves exempt. This too is empirically wrong. Smith gives the obvious example of a man feeling for a woman experiencing the pains of childbirth.

The fact that Smith is right here, and Rousseau is wrong, is absolutely critical if sympathy is to help us deal with questions of justice in today's diverse democratic societies. It is the ability of sympathy to allow us to share all sorts of both pleasures and pains which we would never be liable to ourselves that allows it to help bridge the distance between people with very different experiences of the world. As Herder makes clear, feeling our way into the position of those very different from us is never easy—you have to immerse yourself in another way of life, gain as much of the local knowledge that Professor Nacol describes as you can, and so on. It is never easy, but it is possible. And this possibility is what allows us to overcome the parochialism or cultural chauvinism which might otherwise mar our conception of justice—but only, of course, if we reflectively resolve to do the hard rational, emotional and imaginative work required.

So assume we have gone through all the work that this process of moral reflection requires—reflective work drawing on emotion, imagination and sympathy as well as reason—and we have come to some moral conclusions. These are the dictates of our mature and corrected, our proper and warranted, moral sentiments. To say that they are proper and warranted is to say that they have a normative authority to demand our obedience. Since we are really just obeying ourselves here, I think it is legitimate to describe sentimentalism as offering a theory of reflective autonomy. To answer Professor Zuckert's objections on this point, I should make clear that autonomy in my sense does not require isolation or atomism—the feelings we share with others over the course of our reflection play a central role in all sentimentalist moral reflection. Nor does autonomy require that we be self-created beings. When we legislate for ourselves, we do so using the psychological powers bequeathed to us by nature, and using the terms and concepts bequeathed to us by

culture. We may not have autonomously chosen to be what we are—we are clearly products of some combination of nature and nurture—but I think we still count as autonomous when we obey no one but ourselves.

I realize my talk of psychic democracy might have been confusing here. I never meant to advocate direct democracy, in which every faculty of the soul has a voice in determining our choices at all times. A better metaphor would be representative democracy. Many faculties have a part to play in the process of moral reflection; each has a vote, so to speak. Different sentimentalists will have different positions on the role played by each—the precise roles of reason and sympathy are subjects of considerable dispute. But however the reflective process works, exactly, the products of this process—the mental phenomena “elected” by the rest of the mind—then have an authority which other psychological phenomena do not, however indispensable their contributions may have been along the way.

Some sentimentalists call these products of reflection “moral sentiments” in the plural, but others refer to them as “the moral sense” or “conscience” in the singular. There is nothing unsentimentalist about this. Butler does not identify conscience with reason, though he sometimes identifies it with “reflection.” And there are indications that he thinks of this reflective self-evaluation in a psychologically holistic way. Conscience, for Butler, seems to draw on all the other faculties of the human mind when they turn in on themselves reflectively, though he never specifies exactly how. He merely asserts that it can be “considered as a sentiment of the understanding or as a perception of the heart or, which seems the truth, as including both” (Butler 1983, Dissertation 1: 69). This is why I feel free to classify Butler as a sentimentalist.

Now, the question of whether particular authors are sentimentalists or not needs to be distinguished from the question of whether their particular sentimentalism is, as I call it (following Rawls), free-standing. Butler’s is clearly not a free-standing sentimentalism, nor are those of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson or Herder. Once we establish the proper principles of normative moral psychology, we can accurately describe the process of reflection which results in authoritative moral conclusions. It is then a separate question as to what makes these conclusions authoritative.

Perhaps the answer is metaphysical—the right moral conclusions, reached through the right psychological processes, somehow jibe with the immanent purposes of the larger universe. This, roughly, was Shaftesbury’s view. Or perhaps the answer is theological. Perhaps these purposes in question are not immanent in nature, but are rather the intentions of its creator. This, roughly, was Butler’s, Hutcheson’s and Herder’s view. Butler’s insistence on the divinely-ordained authority of conscience may not render him any less a sentimentalist, but it does prevent his sentimentalism from being free-standing.

Of all the authors I discuss in the book, only Hume unambiguously advocated a free-standing sentimentalism. Smith is, I think, deliberately ambiguous on the matter—though Professor Flanders and I can have our arguments about that some other time. But this question of Smithian exegesis does not matter for purposes of my larger argument. As a religiously and metaphysically skeptical disciple of Hume, I am unavoidably committed to the view that a convincing sentimentalist theory must be free-standing. That said, however, I am always happy to learn from metaphysically- and theologically-grounded sentimentalists about how our moral psychology properly works and about which moral conclusions it properly leads to—most importantly for a political theorist, what conclusions about justice.

As Professor Nacol observes, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy* does not endorse any particular theory of justice. This is a book about *how* we should think and feel our way toward such a theory, rather than *what* theory we must endorse. There are discussions of a couple of sentimentalist theories of justice—Hutcheson’s and, at much greater length, Hume’s—which I think need to be rejected. There’s a discussion of another—Smith’s—which I think is very promising, but still imperfect. And Herder’s scattered remarks on justice, while incredibly important, hardly add up to a clear or comprehensive theory. But the fact that I never come to what Sen calls a “transcendentalist” theory of justice is by no means an endorsement of Sen’s view that such theories are a bad idea. Actually, I think they are a good idea. That is one of the reasons I like Smith’s theory of justice, which includes a distinctively sentimentalist code of natural law—an ideal system of law against which any code of positive law can be judged and found morally wanting. And that is also one of the reasons why I reject Hume’s theory, which

denies the possibility of this sort of natural jurisprudence. I think that we need ideal codes to help us criticize and reform existing ones. And it is here in particular that the ambiguously theological Smith and the explicitly theological Herder can help correct the errors of the openly impious Hume. But as long as a free-standing sentimentalism is possible, these Smithian and Herderian forms of natural law can nonetheless rest on free-standing Humean foundations.

So this leads us to the big disagreement between Professor Flanders and myself: the question of whether a free-standing sentimentalism is actually possible. Can the human mind produce authoritative moral conclusions supported by nothing external to humanity itself? I think it can. As Flanders points out, free-standing sentimentalism can't work in the way Korsgaard's Hume thinks it can: through the narrowly reflexive self-approbation of our moral sentiments themselves, of the moral sense or conscience itself. I simply don't see why a single faculty's self-approval, taken in isolation, could be thought to lend it any moral authority.

But I do think the self-approval of a human mind, taken as a whole, is different. And it is not just different because there are more psychological faculties involved. It is different because self-approval is a necessary element of human happiness. This is the grain of truth at the heart of today's otherwise misguided obsession with self-esteem. When we lack self-approval or self-esteem, when we are plagued by guilt or self-hatred, we render ourselves absolutely miserable.

So morality for Hume really is a matter of hypothetical imperatives. And here is the main one: If you are a psychologically normal human being (that is, if you are a creature capable of reasoning, feeling, imagining, sympathizing and reflecting), and if you want to live at peace with yourself over the long term, obey the dictates of your reflectively stable moral sentiments. There is the added complication that, as with most of the other things requisite for human happiness—love and friendship, for example—moral self-approval can only make you happy if you pursue it for its own sake, and not as a mere means. But we will have to ponder that central paradox of human happiness some other time.

Now, to all this, Flanders basically responds “So what?” “Our happiness,” he says, “is just that: our happiness.” Unless it is a sign that we are in harmony with something outside ourselves—unless it “hooks up” with a teleological nature or with Nature’s God—our happiness doesn’t really matter. Now we’re getting into some very deep meta-ethical waters indeed. But I will see Flanders’ “So what?” and raise a “So what?” of my own. What difference does it make if we’re obeying the purposes of nature or nature’s God? Why shouldn’t we heroically struggle against our nature and our maker, following the noble example of Milton’s Satan? Is it because doing so would be self-defeating, because Satan always loses in the end? If so, what you are really appealing to is one’s own happiness. All normative arguments have to end somewhere, with some value unexplained by any deeper value, and I think human happiness is as good an unexplained explainer as any.

I would love to continue this metaethical argument ad infinitum. But the nice thing about grounding our political commitments in our moral sentiments is that we do not have to. Sentimentalism is something the metaphysical and anti-metaphysical, the theological and anti-theological can share—something secular in the best sense of the word. And that is yet another reason why it is so appealing a theory for the diverse democracies of today.

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